

# Information on Syphilis



## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It has often been called “the great imitator” because so many of the signs and symptoms are indistinguishable from those of other diseases.

## How common is syphilis?

In the United States, health officials reported over 32,000 cases of syphilis in 2002, including 6,862 cases of primary and secondary (P&S) syphilis. In 2002, half of all P&S syphilis cases were reported from 16 counties and 1 city; and most P&S syphilis cases occurred in persons 20 to 39 years of age. Idaho reported 54 cases in 2005.

## How do people get syphilis?

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. Sores occur mainly on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and in the mouth.

Transmission of the organism occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant women with the disease can pass it to the babies they are carrying.

## What are the signs and symptoms in adults?

Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, yet remain at risk for late complications if they are not treated. Most transmission is from persons who are unaware of their infection.

There are 3 stages of syphilis.

### Primary Stage

The primary stage of syphilis is usually marked by the appearance of a single sore (called a chancre), but there may be multiple sores. The time between infection with syphilis and the start of the first symptom can range from 10 to 90 days. The chancre is usually firm, round, small, and painless. It appears at the spot where syphilis entered the body. The chancre lasts 3 to 6 weeks, and it heals without treatment. However, if adequate treatment is not administered, the infection progresses to the secondary stage.

### Secondary Stage

This stage typically starts with the development of a rash on one or more areas of the body. The rash usually does not cause itching. Rashes associated with secondary syphilis can appear as the chancre is healing or several weeks after the chancre has healed. The characteristic rash of secondary syphilis may appear as rough, red, or reddish brown spots both on the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. However, rashes with a different appearance may occur on other parts of the body. Sometimes rashes associated with secondary syphilis are so faint that they are not noticed. In addition to rashes, symptoms of secondary syphilis may include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. The signs and symptoms of secondary syphilis will resolve with or without treatment, but without treatment, the infection will progress to the latent and late stages of disease.

### Late Stage

The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins when secondary symptoms disappear. Without treatment, the infected person will continue to have syphilis even though there are no signs or symptoms; infection remains in the body. In the late stages of syphilis, it may subsequently damage the internal organs, including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. This internal damage may show up many years later. Signs and symptoms of the late stage of syphilis include difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

## How does syphilis affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

The syphilis bacterium can infect the baby of a woman during her pregnancy. Depending on how long a pregnant woman has been infected, she may have a high risk of having a stillbirth (a baby born dead) or of giving birth to a baby who dies shortly after birth. An infected baby may be born without signs or symptoms of disease. However, if not treated immediately, the baby may develop serious problems within a few weeks. Untreated babies may become developmentally delayed, have seizures, or die.

### **How syphilis diagnosed?**

Some health care providers can diagnose syphilis by examining material from a chancre (infectious sore) using a special microscope called a dark-field microscope. If syphilis bacteria are present in the sore, they will show up when observed through the microscope. A blood test is another way to determine whether someone has syphilis.

### **What is the link between syphilis and HIV?**

Genital sores (chancres) caused by syphilis make it easier to transmit and acquire HIV infection sexually. There is an estimated 2- to 5-fold increased risk of acquiring HIV infection when syphilis is present.

### **What is the treatment for syphilis?**

Syphilis is easy to cure in its early stages. A single intramuscular injection of penicillin, an antibiotic, will cure a person who has had syphilis for less than a year. Additional doses are needed to treat someone who has had syphilis for longer than a year. For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available to treat syphilis. Treatment will kill the syphilis bacterium and prevent further damage, but it will not repair damage already done.

### **Will syphilis reoccur?**

Having syphilis once does not protect a person from getting it again. Following successful treatment, people can still be susceptible to re-infection.

### **How can syphilis be prevented?**

The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis, is to abstain from sexual contact or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. Genital ulcer diseases, like syphilis, can occur in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, as well as in areas that are not covered. Correct and consistent use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of syphilis, as well as genital herpes and chancroid, only when the infected area or site of potential exposure is protected.

### **Where can I get more information?**

Central District Health Department  
Office of Epidemiology, Surveillance, and Community Assessment  
707 N. Armstrong Pl.  
Boise, ID 83704  
208-327-8625

[Syphilis](#) – Center's for Disease Control and Prevention -Topic Page

[Syphilis and MSM](#) - Fact Sheet

[STDs and Pregnancy](#) - Fact Sheet

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*If you have additional questions, please call your doctor or local health department.*

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### **Central District Health Department**

[www.cdhd.idaho.gov](http://www.cdhd.idaho.gov)

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